George Mills Short Guide

George Mills by Stanley Elkin

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Characters

Because George Mills is composed in five parts, each treating slices of the lives of various characters named George Mills, it is rich as a Dickens or Hardy novel in idiosyncratic characters. Guillalume, the foppish baron who pronounces the original curse, or the self-doubting but determined King George IV (who keeps his mistress despite a hostile, plotting Parliament), the Florida spiritualists of the current Mills's youth, and the university types who exist on the perimeter of this Mills's life are wonderful types who come briefly to life in the saga of the Georges.

But the four Millses represented in the book are the determining elements of Elkin's characterization. "Greatest Grandfather," the patriarch whose story is retold over the centuries, represents the restless servant class, a Sancho Panza-type character reluctantly associated with a master in search of adventure. It is clear as their mistakes take them to Poland that George is smarter and more resourceful than Guillalume (he saves their lives repeatedly and masterminds their escape). Despite his superior natural qualities, and despite his knowing that nobles like Guillalume do not have jurisdiction "in Horseland," Mills does not harbor thoughts of rebellion. He resents his master's arrogance and realizes how much the privileged depend on their servants — but George accepts the historical trap by letting the master curse him on aristocratic grounds. Even when, upon returning to England, Guillalume, now lord of the manor, proves ungrateful, Mills accepts his second-class citizenship, including a demotion to the stables.

Perhaps the most intriguing characterization is that of the forty-third George Mills, again a character of energy and resourcefulness. Another Sancho Panza, this George survives court intrigues in England, foreign conspiracies in Turkey, and the contrasting vicissitudes of forced service in the Spartan-style Janissaries, then pretending to be a eunuch in a Sultan's harem. He manages to escape, to bring down the Janissary order, and to become a legendary hero as the eunuch whose testicles regenerated spontaneously. He takes pride in his achievements and reputation, and wonders if these will lift the curse, will buy immunity. But this Mills comes to acceptance as he learns that he has been a pawn of history and of politics; he comes to believe that "for people like him protocol was invented." He accepts that protocol and the authority to require deference are a birthright of the privileged, and determines to move to America (where presumably rights are associated with merit, not with birth) to pass on his legacy — which is also an oral tradition empowered by the tellers.

To stop repeating the story is another way to end the curse, and the next-tolast Mills almost makes that step. Recalling perhaps the harem experience of the forty-third George, this one adopts a monastic variation on his janitor's life to hide from the curse. He determines not to marry, but to extinguish "my long, bland, lumpish line."

Fate deals ironically with this Mills.

His wife-to-be is attracted by his defiance of his fate, and the conflict for this Mills, like that of his ancestors, is between biological impulse (the sexual drive is one way in which nature preserves most species) and historical resistance. Like most human beings in history, resistance doesn't have much of a chance.

The final George, although a sentimental and even fatalistic man, one who once had a vision of the double helix and whose journeys took him to danger and hope for alleviation, escapes the curse by not reproducing biologically, thereby stopping his narrative from becoming the raw material of myth for future generations. He comes to an understanding of life Elkin intends us to take quite seriously: "the meaning of life is to live long enough to find something out or to do something well." He has elected to find out for himself the meaning of history — it is a narrative created by storytellers, not an a priori form that dictates our lives for us.

Social Concerns

In the novel George Mills, which Elkin consistently called his personal favorite, and the one critics have seen as his most challenging and problematic, a concern with historical determinism is articulated through the artist's hyperbolic figure of a family's fortune over a millennium, during which each generation bears one male descendant named George Mills. Much of the novel revolves around the apparent inevitability of each generation's being trapped in an evolutionary lock the author describes as "yeomanized a thousand years." Thus a primary issue of this breakthrough novel is the degree to which we choose our fate and the degree to which we are prisoners of what could be called "historical inevitability."

Although Elkin does not paint the contemporary Mills, a St. Louis furniture mover, sympathetically, he intends his readers to question the justification of those who are well-to-do and condescending — such as the cantankerous heiress Mills is hired to serve as chauffeur and eventually confidant — who remain culturally empowered, while those like Mills, some of whose ancestors were competent and even gifted, remain mired in a blue-collar existence. To this historical puzzle Elkin adds several interesting complications: is this unequal distribution of wealth and opportunity due to fate, random occurrence, genetic inheritance, conspiracy of the privileged to hold down the less fortunate, or perhaps the grudging consent of the powerless to remain so?

Elkin adds to this series of possibilities about the fairness of historical traps another element of the cultural enigma. Two major institutions, universities and religion, figure prominently in the story of contemporary St.

Louis. Mills's misadventures involve him in university politics, and he eventually becomes an expert in predicting academic power struggles. His employer turns religious near the end of her life, and Mills was involved as a child with spiritualists, then with a maverick pastor toward the end of his own story. As the novel ends, Mills gives a thematically important sermon at this pastor's church. The novel also tells the story of two Mills ancestors who became involved with dominant hierarchical institutions of their eras.

"Greatest Grandfather" received the curse from his "master," a second son of a minor noble family: "Men have their place . . . It isn't luck of the draw but the brick walls of some secret, sovereign Architecture that makes us so." In another Mills clan representative story, the forty-third Mills becomes an intimate of King George IV, then a prisoner of a Turkish Sultan.

The cultural implication is clear: Institutions and their leaders conspire to promote an hierarchical model, in which the legacy of the unempowered is a barrier to escaping the class to which they are born.

Techniques

Elkin once described George Mills as a fountain of stories, but some readers may be bothered by its defiantly episodic structure. Part One is a self-contained, wonderful story about Greatest Grandfather and the "First Crusade."

Parts Two, Three, and Five chronicle episodically the adventures of the contemporary Mills, with flashbacks to his youth in Florida and speculation on his father's life and decisions. Part Four is the forty-third Mills's story, who tells the first section, his meeting with King George IV, from the firstperson central point of view. Elkin shifts to his characteristic third-person historical omniscient for the large portion of the narrative.

This unchronological telling of the events — telling the forty-third Mills's story as Part Four — reinforces thematic connections among the ways certain generations of Millses adapt to their condition. It also reinforces Elkin's theme concerning the arbitrariness of history. What could be more arbitrary than a strict chronological rendering of events?

Moreover, the episodic nature of the novel extends to episodes that seem very nearly self-contained. One lengthy story is a letter from a renegade spiritualist describing his psychic experiences to the guru for whom George works in Florida. This story, which was published separately, seems a long digression in the Mills saga, and it is only after reading it that we learn that it is part of George's education as a spiritualist. In the overall thematic clustering of the novel, however, it is another instance of an obsession gone compulsive, of the length to which people will go to find spiritual meaning.

For the novice reader, George Mills can be challenging reading, with its nuanced plots, its episodic structure, and its overall theme that history too is a story; but it is a funny, zany book that asks us serious questions about our interpretation of history, and it rewards re-reading with delight and understanding.

Themes

The key themes of the novel concern history itself, as a determinant of human fate, and thus the larger issue of individual freedom to create oneself.

The problematic curse on the Mills family is to a degree their own acceptance of its inevitability, or of history's power to repress and determine our lives. The current George Mills, although overtly less promising than his ancestors, has come to his own way of dealing with history, and progresses to a state Elkin describes at the end of the sermon George gives as the novel concludes as, "relieved of history as an amnesiac."

The novel further associates the escape from history's trap with grace and with denial of life-creating forces.

In an elementary way, the current Mills escapes history's trap by refusing to pass on his flawed birthright.

All his ancestors wanted sons and heirs, who would also be auditors for their stories. The current George has refused to propagate, and he insists in his sermon that the "line's played out" and thus the curse is no more. Elkin compounds this theme by associating the religious concept "grace" with the special immunity George feels when he contemplates his entrapment in and escape from history. Throughout the book George feels "lifted from life," "in a state of grace," immune. He believes he is safe, partly because he has accepted the family version of the curse, and partly because he will not pass the curse into the future. As Elkin told an interviewer, Mills's feeling of "grace" is itself a metaphor for an essentially deterministic belief Mills has that nothing more can ever happen to him. Yet his adventures indicate that it is possible to break the curse by denying its efficacy — if not for oneself, then for posterity. Mills attempts to curry favor with the wealthy heiress whom he drives to Mexico to seek quack cures for cancer, then to hold up the family for a stake after she dies. But he says in his sermon that toadyism is not the answer: "Being tired isn't saved, sucking up isn't grace." Mills has broken a chain of historical inevitability: he will not pass on the curse, and he will deny the deference to wealth and privilege on which it was based.

Finally, Elkin subtly reinforces his theme concerning the tyranny of history by including false historical information in his novel, thus reshaping history. The adventures of the first Mills, which were inspired by Elkin's learning about the famous ancient salt mine Wieliczka in Poland, are a narrative of inventions and discoveries.

Mills and Guillalume are credited with inventing many useful arts and practices — picnics, psychiatry, dressage — and their miscalculated journey to Poland is called the First Crusade. The escape from a sultan's harem by the forty-third Mills is credited with ending the reign of the Janissaries, an army of Turkish mercenaries whose reign of terror did end in the early nineteenth century. By assigning false causes to actual events — is history not in some ways a narrative of causes and effects? — Elkin subtly insists

that history is itself a fictional narrative, and therefore no more suited to rule people's lives than any other fictional narrative.

Key Questions

The most interesting question about any Elkin novel concerns tone and attitude. His narratives are rich in symbol and anecdote, but the attitude he wants his readers to take toward characters and situations can be ambiguous. For George Mills, an obvious issue concerns reciprocity among the three major narratives. Are they successfully integrated? What resonances exist among these texts?

1. In Part One, Greatest Grandfather has an epiphanic moment when he sees a beautiful tapestry and determines that this represents his class's destiny.

What does Elkin mean by the metaphor "tapestry condition"? Is this a valid description of class hierarchy?

2. The forty-third Mills has hilarious adventures in a Sultan's harem. How are these integrated with the themes of the novel? Is the story too far-fetched to be part of a generally realistic narrative?

3. The contemporary Mills associated in his youth with a colony of spiritualists in Florida. Does Elkin create a positive, negative, or neutral impression of spiritualism? How does this section relate to the novel as a whole?

4. Cornell Messenger is a semi-autobiographical figure. Does this character represent an alternative to the "yeomanized" condition of the Mills generations?

5. The current Mills is sentimental, self-pitying, and a racist. How do these qualities affect his representation as the novel's hero?

6. Discuss the sexual relationship between George and his wife. Is it credible? Funny?

7. What are we to make of the story of Judith Glazer's trip to Mexico for laetrile treatments (she promised her family, when diagnosed as terminal, not to seek quack cures)? Does she gain or lose stature with the reader as she faces her mortality?

8. Analyze in detail Mills's sermon at the end of the novel. What does it say about life, social stratification, and history? Is it convincing, given Mills's character and the context in which it is delivered?

9. Is the "lost sister" Mills seeks at the end of the novel an answer to the Mills curse or an illusion that serves Mills's imaginative needs? Does this sister present other thematic possibilities?

Literary Precedents

George Mills represents Elkin's most ambitious adaptation of the picaresque tradition, which has its English origins in the eighteenth-century narratives of Henry Fielding and Laurence Sterne, In these novels, the organizing principle is the adventures of the central character, often a rascal or a social pariah.

Elkin developed this method as early as his first novel Boswell: A Modern Comedy (1964), and his stock in trade has been the adventures, told in episodic manner, of a rogue-hero. In this book, we have three variations on the motif, with distinctive styles and motifs for each Mills's saga.

Another typical Elkin motif involves humor and anachronism. Like Joseph Heller in God Knows (1984), Elkin playfully re-arranges chronology to deny the power of history. When Greatest Grandfather prevents a slaughter by barbarians who surround them as he and Guillalume flee, he quotes the nineteenth-century spiritual, "ain't gonna study war no more!" The novel also captures, with typical Elkin vigor, the stuff and junk that is our contemporary popular culture. The scene in which Mills watches a Jerry Lewis telethon speaks volumes about the morbidity and sentimentality of modern American culture.

By far the most impressive section, from a technical point of view, confirms Elkin's debt to William Faulkner.

The narrative of George's father's efforts to end the curse, and their failure, are presented to readers not as direct narrative, but as a process of reconstruction whereby George and another spiritualist (who later became George's mother's lover) interpret a lost past by inventing a plausible story about it, a way to explain phenomena by creating a fiction about them — precisely one impulse explaining the origin of myth and archetype. Like Quentin Compson and his roommate Shreve in Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! (1936), George and Rev. Wickland, their imaginations inspired by the discoveries of the other, find through narrative a plausible explanation for an event that in itself mystifies.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994